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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000261

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Jaffna in an uproar as Tigers ratchet up the pressure in the wake of confrontation with military

Ref: (A) Colombo 253 (Notal)

- (B) Colombo 244, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Jaffna is in an uproar in the wake of a February 12 confrontation between the Tamil Tigers and the military. Angry over the incident in which several cadre were injured, the Tigers forced the postponement of the planned reopening of the Jaffna Library, a cultural landmark. Tiger spokesman Balasingham was also quoted as bitterly complaining about the incident, asserting it was a threat to the ceasefire. With the help of the monitors, the GSL is trying to tamp down the tensions. In essence, this is another instance of the LTTE's employing mafia-type tactics to prove a point. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) LTTE/MILITARY INCIDENT: Jaffna District is in an uproar in the wake of a February 12 confrontation between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military. The incident took place on February 12 and was sparked when Sri Lanka Army (SLA) troops stopped LTTE women cadre in the town of Manipay, located just outside of Jaffna town. The cadre were reportedly trying to pass through a military checkpoint wearing their uniforms and reacted badly when the SLA ordered them to remove their belts, which were of a military style. (Note: The cadre seem to have been unarmed, but, according to the February 2002 ceasefire accord, they cannot be in uniform in government-controlled areas, such as Jaffna.) The dispute quickly flared into fisticuffs with pro-LTTE Tamil civilians protesting the actions of the military and the SLA calling out a riot squad. Several LTTE cadre and army personnel were injured in the confrontation.

3. (U) SLMM/GSL REACTION: The Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) was quickly called in to investigate the incident. In a public statement issued soon thereafter, SLMM spokesman Teitor Torkelson said the LTTE cadre had violated the ceasefire accord by wearing uniforms in government-controlled Jaffna. He also stated that the army used excessive force when quelling the public demonstration. The SLMM pledged to continue its investigation, and urged both sides to calm down.

4. (SBU) Eager to protect the peace process, the Sri Lankan government also urged that all sides cool off. During a town hall-type meeting in Colombo hosted by a local think-tank, G.L. Peiris and Milinda Moragoda, two key GSL ministers involved in peace process issues, briefly discussed the LTTE-military confrontation on February 13. They asserted that the GSL was doing everything possible to resolve the dispute. Moreover, they said the Tigers had agreed with the GSL on the need to lower temperatures.

5. (SBU) POSTPONEMENT OF LIBRARY REOPENING: The Sri Lankan ministers evidently spoke too soon, as the LTTE decided to up the ante. Pro-LTTE elements honored the group's call for a work stoppage in large parts of Jaffna on February 13. In the meantime, LTTE supporters reportedly attacked the offices of an anti-LTTE Tamil party in Chavakachcheri, a town located to the east of Jaffna town. In reaction to the LTTE-instigated ruckus, Jaffna's mayor announced late February 13 that the planned reopening of the Jaffna Library scheduled for February 14 had been postponed indefinitely. (Note: The library is a cultural landmark for many Tamils. It was burned down in fighting in the 1980s and all its books -- some of them priceless -- were utterly destroyed. In an attempt at reconciliation with Tamils, the government has been working for some time to rebuild the structure, which is believed to be almost finished.) By all accounts, the announcement by the mayor was engineered by the LTTE, which made clear that it was angry about the February 12 incident and did not want any sort of celebration of GSL-Tamil amity at this time.

In making this point, the pro-LTTE elements reportedly paid a personal visit to the mayor, threatening him and his staff.

16. (C) (((Note: The Tiger pressure was a bit much for Jaffna's municipal council members and, shortly after the announcement of the postponing of the library reopening, they resigned en masse. Even Tamil United Liberation Front, "TULF," members of the council -- usually a pro-LTTE block -- were apparently put off by the LTTE's strong-arm tactics. In a rarity, for example, V. Anandasangarai, a senior TULF MP and a leader of the party, expressed public disappointment with the LTTE. While dramatic, the resignations were more symbolic than anything else inasmuch as members' five-year terms of office were up next week in any case. End Note.)))

17. (C) LTTE HITS OUT SOME MORE: Not content with just shutting down the library's reopening, the LTTE decided to up the pressure some more. LTTE spokesman and the head of its negotiating team, Anton Balasingham, for example, was quoted as bitterly complaining about the incident, and stating that if the military did not change its ways the Tigers would reconsider their involvement in the ceasefire. Pro-LTTE students and others have also planned a protest march for February 14 at the end of which a petition is to handed over to the SLMM complaining about the military's actions on February 12.

18. (C) COMMENT: The government and the SLMM continue to work feverishly to tamp down tensions. The GSL, for example, has announced that it is launching a full inquiry into the military's role in the incident. It is not yet clear whether the LTTE will respond in a cooperative manner soon. Certainly, Balasingham's reported statement that the ceasefire could be in the balance was a bit menacing, as it was one of the first times the LTTE has issued such a threat since the peace process began. Another factor that seems to underlie the Tigers' aggressive reaction includes the fact that the group is clearly still sore over the February 7 incident in which three Tiger cadre committed suicide after their arms smuggling boat was intercepted (see Ref B). (Note: It is also the case, of course, that the LTTE's latest protest campaign fits in well with its long-standing opposition to the military's security zones in Jaffna.) In addition, as reviewed in Ref B, the overall pattern of the Tigers' latest antics highlight their continued employment of mafia-type tactics against perceived opponents. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS